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Great Lakes backers thirst for restoration funds

By [TOM HENRY](#)
BLADE STAFF WRITER

WASHINGTON - Everglades envy.

It was unmistakable at the 33rd annual Great Lakes congressional day yesterday, when regional policymakers kept telling everyone how envious they were of a Florida delegation that convinced Congress a couple of years ago to allocate \$8 billion to restore the Everglades.

Great Lakes officials would love to see their region receive a Florida-like allocation to continue the job of restoring the world's largest collection of fresh surface water.

They acknowledged that's no small task, given the number of seats the Great Lakes region is losing in Congress because of population shifts.

Ohio Environmental Protection Agency Director Chris Jones noted that it took Florida about a dozen years to receive the money.

He admitted he is envious.

"You get \$8 billion and people take notice," said Mr. Jones, who chairs a Great Lakes governors' priorities task force on behalf of Gov. Bob Taft.

"We want Everglades kind of money," Mr. Jones added.

The event, split between the Rayburn House and Dirksen Senate office buildings, was attended by about 125 policymakers and staff members.

Sam Speck, director of the Ohio Department of Natural Resources, said he believes the Great Lakes region can sell itself to Congress by showing that benefits extend beyond the immediate area.

The lakes contain 20 percent of the Earth's fresh surface water and are important to the economy as a passageway for shipping and as a recreational draw.

Another influential step in that process could be the degree to which Great Lakes programs impress the General Accounting Office, the investigative arm of Congress. The GAO is examining the effectiveness of several Great Lakes programs, the results of which could be "critical" toward any funding pitches, Mr. DeWine said.

One encouraging sign at the event was participation by a White House official who has helped coordinate the Everglades restoration effort, he said.

William Leary, associate director for natural resources for the Bush

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administration's Council on Environmental Quality, said the country has entered an era in which it needs to do more than clean up contamination. It needs to reverse mistakes from the past - such as filling in valuable wetlands - so that ecosystems can be restored, he said.

"Restoration speaks of optimism - of hope, of change," said Mr. Leary, who has worked on major restoration projects along coastal Louisiana and the San Francisco Bay.

Seven basic and familiar goals - from controlling exotic species to curbing pollution caused by erosion and runoff - were outlined as regional themes for the coming year by one of the event's co-sponsors, the Great Lakes Commission.

The commission is a binational government agency in Ann Arbor that helps coordinate policy.

Tom Skinner, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's administrator for the Great Lakes region, also mentioned some lofty goals the agency expects to release in a report later this year.

One is to have at least 90 percent of all Great Lakes beaches clean enough to stay open 95 percent of every summer by 2010.

Another is to have all 31 polluted harbors and so-called "areas of concern" on the U.S. side of the Great Lakes cleaned up by 2025.

"These goals are obviously ambitious, but we believe they are achievable," Mr. Skinner said.

Not a lot was said about how coveted the Great Lakes may become as other parts of the world grow and continue to struggle to meet their water needs.

Joy Mulinex, spokeswoman for a task force made up of Great Lakes congressmen, said federal legislators probably will not address the issue of Great Lakes water diversion or bulk exports until seeing the final version of a plan to limit withdrawals that governors and Canadian premiers signed in Niagara Falls in June.

Congress likely will be asked to ratify it in 2003.

President Bush caused a stir in the summer by telling a group of foreign journalists he wouldn't mind seeing Canadian water exported to his home state of Texas, as well as other Southwest states that are running dry.

The comment, made in passing, drew harsh criticism from some of Canada's largest newspapers.

Mr. Leary apparently tried to quell some of those lingering concerns on behalf of Mr. Bush yesterday. "There should be no straw in the Great Lakes for diversion," he said.

John Mills, the highest-ranking Canadian official in attendance, acknowledged that water "certainly is rising on the agenda for many nations" and likely will be a topic at a world summit in Johannesburg this fall.

The Great Lakes have faced export pressure for years.

It could become harder as the years go by for the United States and Canada to keep defending the lakes from the international marketplace, given that those two countries are the world's top water consumers, Mr. Mills said. He is director general of Environment Canada's Ontario region.

"It's quite clear we have a long way to go in terms of water conservation," he said.

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